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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001514

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS

SUBJECT: WAR OF WORDS OVER ABKHAZIA CONTINUES; SOUTH OSSETIA BROUGHT INTO MIX

REF: MOSCOW 1499

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel A. Russell. Reasons 1.4(b) and (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: The verbal fireworks between Russia and Georgia continued May 28-29 with Russian FM Lavrov declaring that Russia could not negotiate with the current regime in Tbilisi and suggesting a "foreign hand" was guiding Georgia's actions, while Georgia called for an urgent UN Security Council meeting, demanded compensation for the drone shot down on April 20, and insisted Russia had rebuffed an April 23 opportunity to investigate the incident. Meanwhile, Russian Co-Chair of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) for Georgian-Ossetian Conflict Resolution Yuriy Popov, in a May 27 interview, reminded observers that the situation in South Ossetia gave serious grounds for concern. The MFA said it was likely that President Medvedev would meet with Georgian President Saakashvili at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum June 6-8, but noted the GOR had not received confirmation of Saakashvili's attendance. The Georgian Embassy here, however, confirmed Saakashvili would travel to St. Petersburg, regardless of a presidential meeting. Lowering the public rhetoric will create more opportunity for the first Medvedev-Saakashvili meeting to be a success. End summary.

War of Words

¶12. (U) On May 27, following issuance of the UNOMIG report on the April 20 shootdown of a UAV over Abkhazia, FM Lavrov and the Russian MFA accused Georgia of having refused to allow Russia to investigate the incident or to inspect the videotape of the UAV destruction. In the wake of Georgian demands for compensation for the UAV, insistence that the Russians had been offered on April 23 an opportunity to study the UAV shootdown and exchange information, and call for an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council, Lavrov announced during a press conference May 28 that Russia could not negotiate with the current regime in Tbilisi. Lavrov charged that he did not understand what the Georgian authorities wanted, unless they were "being used by someone else to constantly provoke Russia." He reiterated previous statements claiming Russia had withdrawn its troops from Georgia, and argued Georgia was breaking the terms of agreements which Russia was prepared to uphold. Lavrov also said he doubted that Georgia would go through with the agreement to set up a joint antiterrorism center in Batumi.

¶13. (C) Dmitriy Tarabrin, Deputy Director of the 4th CIS Department of the MFA, told us May 29 that the only offer the Georgians had made following the April 20 incident was to exchange radar information. They had never provided Russia with the actual video, without which the GOR could not determine the veracity of the tape. All Russian experts had been able to view was the Internet version which could easily have been fabricated or doctored.

¶4. (C) Tarabrin said Russia was not opposed to holding a meeting of the UN Security Council but reiterated that if Georgia were to be present, Abkhaz authorities should also be allowed to participate.

Saakashvili-Medvedev?

¶5. (C) When asked whether he could confirm that Medvedev would meet with Georgian President Saakashvili at the June 6-8 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Tarabrin said the Georgians had requested the meeting and Russia expected it to take place, but the GOR had not yet received confirmation of Saakashvili's attendance at the Forum. Georgian Embassy officials, however, confirmed that Saakashvili would travel to St. Petersburg, regardless of a meeting with Medvedev.

Don't Forget South Ossetia

¶6. (U) In an interview with Izvestiya May 28, JCC Co-Chair Popov said that while developments in South Ossetia were not as sensational as in Abkhazia "where with mysterious suicidal stubbornness unmanned spy planes have got into the habit of flying in, only to be downed every time by Abkhaz air defense forces," there were serious reasons for concern. He claimed the numbers of Georgian police were being built up, road movement was being blocked, and Georgia was still not interested in overcoming the vacuum in the negotiating process. He asserted that Georgia was ignoring Russia's outstanding proposal to hold an informal meeting of the JCC

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Co-Chairs in Moscow to reanimate the dialogue and concluded that Georgian ill-will had frozen the negotiating process.

Comment

¶7. (C) While Security Council Deputy Secretary Zubakov is in Tbilisi (accompanied by Georgian Ambassador Kitsmarishvili) for private consultations, the public rhetoric has heated up again, eroding what little of the good will that might have been behind the warm national day message by Medvedev. As we saw in the 2006 spy scandal, Russia will respond to Georgian name and shame tactics by digging in. This latest public exchange obviously has not helped set the stage for the expected Medvedev-Saakashvili encounter in St. Petersburg.

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